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What the Left's fight for worker rights in Ukraine and Russia has in common, and what it does not

Friday 13 May 2022, by [MORRIS Jeremy](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2022).

It is understandable and right that all the focus of left solidarity should be on Ukraine right now and for the foreseeable future. However, it is useful for left activists in the West to have some awareness of the situation before the invasion and now in Russia. So in this piece I will try to summarize some of the struggles Russian activists were engaged in before the war, how the war has affected Russian society, and what the implications are of that for left activism there.

Before the invasion, Ukraine and Russian left activism were not so different as one might imagine. In conversation with Ukrainian labour scholars we have reflected on the similarity of the general anti-left political landscapes of both countries, the anti-labour legal environment that make strikes and organizing difficult, and also the way firms can stymie activism by using calls for loyalty and offers of tokenistic paternalism. It's to the credit of organizers in both countries that they've been able to cut through this generally hostile atmosphere and make some spectacular successes, albeit not on a national scale. Further, despite significant differences in the meaning of 'oligarchy' in each country, both states are characterized by extreme wealth and ownership concentrations; both have extremely low wages for workers; both have political regimes where the owners of capital can easily press for anti-worker actions.

It is true that Russia became a lot more authoritarian in the last ten years or so and this did make left organizing difficult and sometimes dangerous. When I did fieldwork with automotive union activists ten years ago it was noteworthy when the [Centre E](#) (anti-extremism units of the Interior Ministry) detained someone and put pressure on them, citing broad powers combating 'inciting social discord'. Now this is unnecessarily because of the more recent broad anti-protest and anti-opposition laws in Russia which are easily applied to leftists who try to defend migrant workers' rights, for example. This is the [case of Kirill Ukraintsev](#) who has been arrested multiple times in relation to his activism in support of striking food delivery workers in Moscow. As of April 2022 he faces up to five years in prison for multiple offences, including for merely reposting a social media message about unauthorized labour protests. His case is being dealt with by the high profile Federal Investigative Committee - a kind of Russian FBI. This is an unprecedented use of anti-protest laws to target a union organizer and a frightening harbinger of things to come.

Why come down so hard on labour activists and pursue them in this draconian way? On the one hand simply because they can, but on the other, people like Ukraintsev have been effective roaming activists who migrated from political causes to labour rights. My own research in this area has traced some of the history of organizing in automotive plants where dedicated independent trade unions had some noteworthy successes in forcing foreign employers like Volkswagen to the negotiating table to sign collective labour agreements with workers. More recently, activists have

had some success in organizing gig workers – the area Ukrainstev was intensively involved in. But they've also shifted to less obviously political causes like campaigns against turning Moscow region into a rubbish dump, and the forced rehousing of residents in older Soviet-era blocks being torn down to make way for gentrification. In other words, it's important to draw attention to the small groups of dedicated left activists that have had significant impact out of proportion to their numbers. Moreover, they increasingly distance themselves, implicitly or explicitly from 'mainstream' political protest in Russia which some see as the purview of 'liberal' opposition politics. The arrest and jailing of Alexei Navalny in 2021 gets enormous attention. He is a political prisoner, but so is Kirill Ukrainstev.

What about reactions to the war in Russia? On the one hand this looks like a major blow to left activists – how to respond to the upswell in patriotic and outright imperialistic sentiment? Once again, parallels to Ukraine are striking: 'forget about class struggle – we're in an existential fight for survival' is an argument used in both countries. On the other hand, the economic fallout from the war in Russia is an opportunity for activists to connect impoverishment and unemployment to the corrupt and venal regime. This is not easy of course. For the moment we can observe a form of defensive consolidation in Russia – people in general are not enthusiastic for war with their neighbour but they instinctively cleave to the authorities out of fear for the future and fear of the machinery of the massive potential for violence of the Russian state. There are of course some imperial chauvinists and casual anti-Ukrainian sentiment is widespread. There are also a broad group of older and less informed people who mainly consume state TV news and at least partially buy in to a narrative that Nato expansion is directed against Russia and that Ukraine is a US proxy. Some even believe the untrue propaganda about Ukrainian neonazis. Therefore there is widespread resignation to the conflict. It's a form of dealing with cognitive dissonance when people reassure themselves by saying 'conflict was inevitable; better it happen in Ukraine than in Russia'.

However, most working Russians know from the Donbas war since 2014 that the blood and treasure used to fight revanchist and cynically opportunistic campaigns abroad are paid for by ordinary people. They see the deteriorating economic conditions that propaganda and war frenzy in the media cannot hide. In the short term, the Russian government can continue to paint the war as preventative and Russia as a victim. For some this is enough to accept economic and social 'pain' in the short term. However, by the end of 2022 massive economic dislocation is inevitable in Russia if the conflict continues. We will see then the value of Russian left activists. Will they all be in jail? Will they be able to help people connect the dots and understand who is to blame, not only for the war, but for their economic and social insecurity and dispossession? It might be tempting to write off Russia, along with the regime that launched the invasion of Ukraine. But Russian left activists already need our support and solidarity. They will need it even more as time goes on. [Here's the petition to free Kirill](#), along with a further explanation of his plight.

Jeremy Morris

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P.S.

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